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SOCIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN FRANCE, ITALY AND GERMANY

SUMMARY FINAL REPORT

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I. OBJECTIVES

a) In certain respects, environmental problems represent the alternative, negative aspects of the modern world, whether developed or otherwise. The project tried to provide answers to the following questions : how individual social groups perceive these problems; what importance such problems have for them in relation to other socio-economic or individual concerns; what are the points of reference they employ in interpreting environmental "disorders"; within which thought systems or visions of the future are environmental concerns framed; and to what extent individuals feel themselves implicated, or otherwise, in any solutions they might feel are possible.

b) The environment has become, over a relatively short term, a central concern both for European nations and for the European Union. The public, for its part, is generally informed through the various media which address both global environmental problems (such as the degradation of the ozone layer, for example) and issues of more local concern (acid rain, groundwater pollution). Pressure groups of all sorts (nature protection, species preservation and so on) operate in the field along with ecological militants; the scientific and expert community also have a crucial role to play often in sounding the alarm. The project sought to respond to the following questions : What is the general public's reaction to this constantly moving environmental concern of these interactions ? What does it mean for the individual ? What is considered important, what environmental standards and constraints are considered acceptable and what issues demand the most immediate attention ? What are individuals to make of these various issues and what is their relationship to information sources ? These are some of the questions the research project addressed.

c) The manner in which social groups in different countries and indeed regions respond to environmental issues is an important indicator of cultural differences and of areas of conflict both within and between nations. The project intended to identify such cultural differences and possible conflicts.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study of social representations does not imply restricting oneself solely to the level of discourse as a form of autonomous expression of action. The concept, such as it has been developed and employed by researchers in a variety of analytical domains, always includes two approaches: on the one hand, tracing how individuals interpret the world (the level of discourse); on the other hand, knowing how these representations serve to guide their actions (the level of practice). The individual thereby actively participates in the maintenance or the transformation of a social representation.

The questionnaire employed in this research project sought to identify the social representations of the environment at two levels.

1) The grouping of words by individuals (studied using the technique of similitude) allows one to identify the relational structure as well as the relative weight of the different discourses (media, scientific, etc..) that contribute to social attitudes and representations of the environment. With this technique, the analysis of word choice is no longer restricted solely to identifying the frequency of different word occurrence. Rather, it permits the decoding of the logic by which an individual's different word choices are made. The analysis of headings given to the individual's constructed groupings of words permits one, moreover, to control the semantic variation appropriate to each word used. For the comparative approach adopted in this research, this analysis also provides a variable for the cultural definition of each nation studied.

2) The second level of analysis seeks to understand the discursive logic of social representations of the environment by the study of the different types of reasoning used by individuals. The subject is faced with a wide range of discursive, conflicting situations in the face of which, he/she needs to adopt a position. The arguments thereby produced are analysed following their natural logic. This enables the researcher to understand the construction of different subjects of discourse by examining the ways the different terms are placed in relation to each other. It also allows giving further than simple thematic analysis to explore the logic of the reasoning employed by the individuals in the context of their daily life. This improves the ability to trace the socio-economic contribution to social representations of the environment and to compare the importance of this contribution in each of the nations under study. This also enables identifying the eventual cultural specificity's of social representations of the environment in each country.

III. MAIN RESULTS

III.1. One can speak of a system concerning environmental representations both relating to, and autonomous of, the system of representations of nature. This autonomy is stronger in Germany than in France and it just begins to appear in Italy. Opposite to the representations of nature where there can be no trace of man, the representation of the environment always implicates human beings, their practices, their social relationships, social domination and so on. The Environment has many aspects : ethical, political, and aesthetic; and there is a dialectic between these aspects.

III.2 In the three countries, people think that States as well as individuals have a very important part to play in respect of normalisation and regulation. German people are implicated as individuals who can change things through personal alternative practices. The French believe in collective actions, they have a more political turn of mind. The Italians find it very difficult to switch from private to public concerns; they are conscious of the problems but they often do not know how to get involved.

III.3 As to ethical problems, responsibility is a key notion, it covers up a sense of guilt towards nature, but this guilt is not always felt in the same way : in Germany, they think : "industries are responsible, but my family and I are quite innocent"; in Italy and France, people are more concerned with degradation's of the environment as actors and consumers of modernity, but the Italian people do not know what to do and the French do not do much.

III.4 In what concerns aesthetic problems, nature is beautiful, the environment is not : it requires roads, big houses, *beton* ,and destruction of landscape. German people are more concerned with the landscape than French people. In France there is a large countryside, not yet damaged by industry or big towns, whereas in Italy and Germany there is less of a break between town and country; it is much more a system of conurbation.

III.5 In the three countries, the model of development is controversial. People are sensitive to the negativity of this model, but have nothing else to propose and they keep somewhere in their mind the idea that what technology has destroyed, technology can repair. This is particularly true in France where positivism still dominates, whereas it is not felt so strongly in Germany and Italy. The French positivism has a lot of consequences. It is the country where the topic of "the quality of life" is the most important. The German, but also the Italian, speak much more of possible disasters and are concerned about the future. The French believe in science, the German and Italian too; but they think that some of the damages cannot be undone.

III.5 The ecologists have a positive image of the environment in the sense that they identify problems and actions to address them; but many people are not interested in ecological thought and think that ecologists are poor politicians. They are sympathetic but have not really developed a new *Weltanschauung* (World view). In fact, almost everyone accepts modernity, and do not want to return to the past, but they regret the good aspects of this past, especially in what concerns the beauty of nature, the interdependence of men, the quality of social relationship. One must say that people forge a sort of "modernity utopia" mixing the good aspects of the past with those of the present, they dream of a life in a society which would be at peace with nature and itself.

The differences on which the research has thrown a light can be situated on three levels :

a) the level of the "visions" of the world one could say that the German have a "mixed" pagan and Protestant vision, the Italian a Catholic vision, and the French a rather secular vision;

b) the level of development : the more a country is industrially developed, the more conscious it is of environmental issues. This is also true for regions : Northern Italy and Alsace are very close to Germany from this point of view. The other side of productive and technological modernity, is that negativity (e.g. environmental pollution) obviously appears where it exists. Elsewhere, people still wish to have this modernity (and wealth) which they hope to enjoy.

c) the importance of these countries spaces, whether they are natural or not is partly due to this fact: French people, the Italian, and above all, the German's, live in a strongly conurbanised space, live closer to each other, or see each other more frequently and this influence their attitudes towards nature.

IV. SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND POLICY RELEVANCE

IV.1 Scientific interest

This was one of the first attempts to put attitudes against environmental issue within the context of the broader representative systems of individuals and social groups. Locating the environment in terms of value systems, world news and cultural systems was an innovative element of the project.

IV.2 policy relevance

The project contributed to the improvement of our knowledge of contemporary European societies, and in particular to inform of potentially different expectations between European nations or regions, regarding environmental standards